

*IN CELEBRATION OF THE YEAR OF FAITH  
October 11, 2012 – November 24, 2013*

*AT THE CATHEDRAL PARISH OF SAINT RAPHAEL  
in Madison, Wisconsin*

*This Year of Faith occurs on the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. The Year of Faith commemorates that Council, and comes with an invitation to revisit the documents produced by Vatican II so we may better understand the authentic teaching of that Council and put it into practice.*

## **DECLARATION ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM (*DIGNITATIS HUMANAE*)**

### **A. The Significance of *Dignitatis Humanae***

During these summer months, we are looking at several of the shorter documents of the Second Vatican Council.

Since we have just begun this year's Fortnight for Freedom – a two-week period concluding on the Fourth of July – a very obvious document for us to discuss today is Vatican II's "Declaration on Religious Freedom" – *Dignitatis Humanae*.

There is another reason as well that makes it appropriate for us to look at this document right now.

Last month, in looking at *Gaudium et Spes*, I drew upon remarks made by Joseph Ratzinger (long before he was elected pope) in which he criticized the uncritical optimism of that document.

More recently, as Pope Benedict, he wrote an introduction to a new book on the Second Vatican Council in which he made another critique of *Gaudium et Spes*, namely, that while it spoke about the contemporary world, it failed to define and evaluate "the distinctive characteristics of our time so that a meaningful appreciation and critique could be given."

He went on to say that two of the critical issues inadequately treated by *Gaudium et Spes* were addressed in other documents of the Council. One of these issues was religious liberty, to which this document – *Dignitatis Humanae* – was devoted.

In writing recently about the issue of religious freedom as it is treated in *Dignitatis Humanae*, Pope Benedict said:

*At stake was the freedom to choose and practice religion and the freedom to change it, as fundamental human rights and freedoms . . . [G]iven its inner foundation, such a concept could not be foreign to the Christian faith, which had come into being claiming that the State could neither decide on the truth nor prescribe any kind of worship.*

*The Christian faith demanded freedom of religious belief and freedom of religious practice in worship, without thereby violating the law of the State in its internal ordering; Christians prayed for the emperor, but did not worship him. To this extent, it can be said that Christianity, at its birth, brought the principle of religious freedom into the world.*

From the dawn of human history, to belong to a particular people meant also to worship the gods of that people as one's own. There was no such thing as a society of "mixed religion." The Jewish people, of course, maintained their own religion even when they were dispersed to live in various cities around the ancient world.

By the time of the Roman Empire, the situation had changed somewhat. The Empire included different peoples with many different gods. There were also devotees of Eastern mystery religions among the citizens and subjects of the Empire. Rome tolerated all of these so long as the adherents were also willing to acknowledge and worship the gods of the Romans.

Christians challenged this system from the beginning, saying that they wanted to be loyal members of the Empire but refusing to acknowledge its gods. In this way, it was Christians who first insisted on religious liberty.

## **B. Christianity as the Herald of Religious Liberty**

What Pope Benedict says there in a succinct way is more thoroughly described in *Dignitatis Humanae* – that recognition of the right of religious liberty goes back to the very beginning of the Church's life.

As *Dignitatis Humanae* points out, this tradition begins with the Lord Himself. While He did not teach explicitly about religious liberty, his gave a clear example –

- refusing to compel belief in those to whom He spoke, and
- recognizing the legitimate but limited authority of civil government.

*Christ is at once our Master and our Lord and also meek and humble of heart. In attracting and inviting His disciples He used patience. (cf. Mt 11:28-30) He wrought miracles to illuminate His teaching and to establish its truth, but His intention was to rouse faith in His hearers and to confirm them in faith, not to exert coercion upon them. (cf. Mt 9:28-29). He did indeed denounce the unbelief of some who listened to Him, but He left vengeance to God in expectation of the day of judgment. (cf. Mt. 4:8-10) When He sent His Apostles into the world, He said to them: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved. He who does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:16). But He Himself, noting that the cockle had been sown amid the wheat, gave orders that both should be allowed to grow until the harvest time, which will come at the end of the world. (cf. Mt 13:30,40-42) He refused to be a political messiah, ruling by force (cf. Mt 4:8-10) . . . He acknowledged the power of government and its rights, when He commanded that tribute be given to Caesar: but He gave clear warning that the higher rights of God are to be kept inviolate: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Mt 22:21). (DH, 11)*

The example of the Lord was followed by the Apostles.

*Taught by the word and example of Christ, the Apostles followed the same way. From the very origins of the Church the disciples of Christ strove to convert men to faith in Christ as the Lord; not, however, by the use of coercion or of devices unworthy of the Gospel, but by the power, above all, of the word of God. (cf. ICor 2:3-5) . . . [T]hey rejected all "carnal weapons" (IICor 10:4): they followed the example of the gentleness and respectfulness of Christ and they preached the word of God in the full confidence that there was resident in this word itself a divine power able to destroy all the forces arrayed against God (cf Eph 6:11-17) . . . As the Master, so too the Apostles recognized legitimate civil authority. "For there is no power except from God," the Apostle teaches, and thereafter commands: "Let everyone be subject to higher authorities.... He who resists authority resists God's ordinance" (Romans 13:1-5). At the same time, however, they did not hesitate to speak out against governing powers which set themselves in opposition to the holy will of God: "It is necessary to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). (ibid)*

### **C. The Temptation Against Religious Liberty**

While the Church was the first herald of religious liberty, it was difficult – it probably would have been impossible – for the Church to resist taking advantage of the help of the rulers who had become Christian and wanted to support the mission of the Church.

The Edict of Milan by which Christianity was legalized in 313 was undoubtedly a good thing; but in 391, Emperor Theodosius I went further, adopting Christianity as the imperial religion.

Even prior to that, as well as well as long afterwards, kings who embraced the Faith brought their nations with them.

The Kingdom of Armenia was the first state to adopt Christianity as its religion when St. Gregory the Illuminator converted King Tiridates III and members of his court, probably in 301.

King Olaf I of Norway (+1000) is said to have built the first church in his country, and to have been instrumental in the forcible conversion of the Norse.

In many nations of Europe, the Baptism of the king was the pivotal moment at which Christianity became – in law or in fact – the religion of the country.

Across Europe, as Christianity became ascendant, it became entirely natural to think that “Throne and Altar” should work in close collaboration.

Quite rightly, the Church has seen virtuous Christian monarchs as an ideal – and have even canonized a fair number of them: Louis IX of France (St. Louis), and St. Wenceslaus (Duke of Bohemia). In these and other cases, rulers were not canonized for imposing the Faith on their subjects. They were justly honored for their personal piety, their charity toward the poor and their devotion to justice. That kind of contribution by a Christian ruler in no way violates the principle of religious liberty.

But there were darker examples of the collaboration of “Throne and Altar” as well – notably, of course, the Spanish Inquisition. Though never as bad as it was made out to be in the propaganda of English Protestants, the Spanish Inquisition was an instance of the power of the state being used to enforce religious uniformity.

Of course, this was not done with purely or even predominantly religious motivation. The Spaniards had just succeeded in driving out the Moslems after a 500-year occupation. The presence of non-Christians was thought to be a threat to the security of the state. Maybe if we ever live under Moslem occupation for 500 years, we will judge the Spanish Inquisition somewhat less harshly.

## **D. The Persistence of the Principle**

*Dignitatis Humanae* concedes that Christians have not always been perfect in defending religious liberty in practice, but insists that this principle has always been affirmed.

*In the life of the People of God, as it has made its pilgrim way through the vicissitudes of human history, there has at times appeared a way of acting that was hardly in accord with the spirit of the Gospel or even opposed to it. Nevertheless, the doctrine of the Church that no one is to be coerced into faith has always stood firm. (DH 12)*

In preparation for the third millennium, Pope John Paul II was even more candid in his admission that the Church has not always lived up to its own principle of religious liberty.

*Another painful chapter of history to which the sons and daughters of the Church must return with a spirit of repentance is that of the acquiescence given, especially in certain centuries, to intolerance and even the use of violence in the service of truth. It is true that an accurate historical judgment cannot prescind from careful study of the cultural conditioning of the times, as a result of which many people may have held in good faith that an authentic witness to the truth could include suppressing the opinions of others or at least paying no attention to them. Many factors frequently converged to create assumptions which justified intolerance and fostered an emotional climate from which only great spirits, truly free and filled with God, were in some way able to break free. Yet the consideration of mitigating factors does not exonerate the Church from the obligation to express profound regret for the weaknesses of so many of her sons and daughters who sullied her face, preventing her from fully mirroring the image of her crucified Lord, the supreme witness of patient love and of humble meekness. From these painful moments of the past a lesson can be drawn for the future, leading all Christians to adhere fully to the sublime principle stated by the Council: "The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it wins over the mind with both gentleness and power." (Tertio Millennio Adveniente, 35). [At the end there, he is quoting *Dignitatis Humanae*.]*

But *Dignitatis Humanae* is quite right in asserting that the principle of religious liberty – that no one should be constrained by external force to act against his or her conscience in matters of religious profession – has always been acknowledged in our tradition.

The Declaration does not cite this example, but St. Thomas Aquinas – the great 13<sup>th</sup> century Dominican – famously taught that unbelievers should not be impelled to embrace the Faith against their consciences.

*Among unbelievers there are some who have never received the faith, such as the heathens and the Jews: and these are by no means to be compelled to the faith, in order that they may believe, because to believe depends on the will. (Summa Theologiae, II,II,q10,a8)*

*Dignitatis Humanum* does cite the 1917 Code of Canon Law (c. 1361) and words of Pius XII – the encyclical *Mystici Corporis* (1943) and a speech to the Roman Rota in 1946 – to illustrate that this principle is not an innovation of the Second Vatican Council.

It is interesting to note here that some who rejected the Second Vatican Council – notably Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre – in addition to denouncing the liturgical changes introduced at the Council, also objected to the principle of religious freedom as enunciated in *Dignitatis Humanae*. Archbishop Lefebvre was apparently unimpressed by the example of Christ and the Apostles as supporting this approach.

## **E. False Conclusions from the Principle**

While we insist on the importance of the principle of religious liberty, our understanding of it differs somewhat from that of many of our neighbors in our current relativistic culture.

I return to the first passage I cited from Benedict XVI, commenting on the question of religious freedom. Pope Benedict writes further:

*[But]the interpretation of this right to freedom in the context of modern thought was not easy, since it could seem as if the modern version of religious freedom presupposed the inaccessibility of the truth to man and so, perforce, shifted religion into the sphere of the subjective.*

What is he saying? The Church sees religious liberty as an essential human right. But that does not mean we think that it is impossible to know the truth – so that all religious faith is just opinion, or a subjective interpretation of

reality. If that were the case, then religious faith could have no public consequences and would need to remain an entirely private matter.

That is not why we believe in religious liberty.

*Dignitatis Humanae* make this very clear.

*First, the council professes its belief that God Himself has made known to mankind the way in which men are to serve Him, and thus be saved in Christ and come to blessedness. We believe that this one true religion subsists in the Catholic and Apostolic Church, to which the Lord Jesus committed the duty of spreading it abroad among all men. . . . On their part, all men are bound to seek the truth, especially in what concerns God and His Church, and to embrace the truth they come to know, and to hold fast to it. . . . Religious freedom, in turn, which men demand as necessary to fulfill their duty to worship God, has to do with immunity from coercion in civil society. Therefore it leaves untouched traditional Catholic doctrine on the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ. (DH, 1)*

Catholic support for religious liberty should not be understood to mean that we have slipped into indifferentism – saying that each person is free to adopt the religion of his or her choice because no one really knows the truth, and religion is just a personal whim anyway.

“Religious tenets shouldn’t be imposed, because they’re just a matter of personal preference and opinion . . . religion is a bit like a hobby that might be a little eccentric, but is essentially harmless as long as you just do in your basement.”

No! Religious liberty is an essential human right not because it is a superfluous diversion, but because the human person has a duty to seek and acknowledge the Creator. Because we have a duty to acknowledge religious truth, we must be free to do so according to our best and most sincere efforts.

## **F. Our Task**

What does this mean for us? What are we to do?

## **1. The Defense of Our Religious Liberty**

In the first place, it is clearly important that we defend religious liberty. *Dignitatis Humanae* makes this point explicitly.

*Among the things that concern the good of the Church and indeed the welfare of society here on earth—things therefore that are always and everywhere to be kept secure and defended against all injury—this certainly is preeminent, namely, that the Church should enjoy that full measure of freedom which her care for the salvation of men requires. (DH 13)*

This Fortnight for Freedom reminds us of the urgency of defending religious freedom right here, in our own place.

One of the very troubling things we have seen in the last few years is rhetoric in which the expression of “freedom of religion” has been replaced by “freedom of worship.”

“Freedom of worship” is important, and it is part of “freedom of religion,” but it is not the same thing.

“Freedom of religion” includes the right to act on our religious principles in the conduct of our daily lives. It means that Catholic institutions should be given equal treatment under law, and not excluded from serving others on account of our moral convictions. And it means that neither we, nor our institutions, should be coerced by government authority to do things that are contrary to our religious faith and morals.

Unfortunately, this is something that we can no longer take for granted.

## **2. The Use of Our Religious Liberty**

Just important as defending our religious liberty, is remembering the end – the purpose – of that liberty. It exists so that all people might freely come to embrace faith and service of the true God, and to live according to His benevolent will for us.

This goal must not (and cannot) be achieved by coercion. But this does not mean that we only need to leave others alone and stay out of their way.

From the beginning, the True Faith was spread in a very specific way – by believers giving witness to it.

*The disciple is bound by a grave obligation toward Christ, his Master, ever more fully to understand the truth received from Him, faithfully to proclaim it, and vigorously to defend it . . . (DH 14)*

We believe that our Faith is true. We neither desire nor need to impose the Faith by force, we have confidence that the truth of the Faith has the power to convince. As *Dignitatis Humanae* puts it:

*The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it wins over the mind with both gentleness and power. (DH 1)*

One evidence for the truth of the Faith is that it is not only internally consistent, but consistent with what our experience teaches us about our lives.

The Faith is consistent with what our conscience urges us to do – not because we have been conditioned observe eccentric Catholic teachings, but because in the depths of our souls, we know that when we do what the Faith asks, we are at peace.

And perhaps, most importantly, to the extent that we live our Faith, it shows itself – both to ourselves and to others – as being evidently the best way to live. The fruit that a genuine Christian life produces – and the kind of person it makes one to be – this is probably the best argument for the Faith in our times.

And this is the task that the Lord has entrusted to us, to every disciple – to give that witness to the world.